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'I was really, really shocked': A sociological exploration of the transition experiences of English Youth Academy male footballers from school to work

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Abstract

The world of football arguably brings together and unites people in support of their teams and countries, while inspiring young children and adolescents to dream of a professional career. Existing research in the field has sought to begin to understand what professional footballers experience on their journey through the game. However, much of this UK-based research has focused on first team players and their professional experiences, including transitions from youth team to first team and to retirement. This study, therefore, aimed to examine players during their youth academy scholarship at one English Championship club. This study focused on the transitional experiences of youth players from school to the academy and their resulting embodying of a footballer's identity. Twelve semi-structured interviews with players aged 17–19, were conducted and then analysed by thematic analysis using figurational sociology concepts. Three different types of transition were identified. Among other reasons, early specialisation in football was a prevalent factor that partly influenced the way the players experienced their transition. The transition into the academy coincided with the transition from youth to adulthood that was arguably anything but linear as players managed the dominant sub-cultures present in the club.

Keywords

identity, interdependencies, professional football, shock theory, transition

Introduction

Recent statistics released as part of the BT Sport Films (2018) *No Hunger in Paradise* documentary state that 180 players out of 1.5 million youth academy players will be successful in the Premier League: a success rate of 0.012%. Comparatively, in Roderick's

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(2006a) study, four former and current players stated that to be considered as having 'made it', that is, being successful, was a combination of acceptance into the first team squad and the league position of the club they signed at. Given the widely accepted knowledge that a career in any sport is short-lived with football no exception to this, there is a high rate of labour wastage among young players (Bourke, 2003; Manley et al., 2016). However, the possibilities and rewards that are awarded and available to those who are successful at the highest level such as financial security, fame, and status, are enticing methods that continually attract young talents to football (Bourke, 2003; Brown and Potrac, 2009). The fascination of the game and the lives led by footballers has been the source of a growing number of research publications, although to penetrate the world of football is an exceptionally difficult task given its nature of keeping its innermost workings private and away from public scrutiny (Kelly and Waddington, 2006; Law et al., 2020; Parker, 2000; Platts and Smith, 2018; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b) Of the few who have succeeded in gaining access (Kelly and Waddington, 2006; Law et al., 2020; Roderick, 2006a, 2014) their UK-based studies have featured the experiences of first team players. Comparatively, and while growing as an area of interest, youth team football research has included topics such as the internalisation of a sporting habitus that results in lower possibilities of capital exchange for post-retirement (McGillivray et al., 2005), managing environment norms such as the concept of silence (Manley et al., 2016), friendships within youth environments (Adams and Carr, 2017), and education provision for youth players (Parker, 2000; Platts and Smith, 2018), there is, to the best of the authors knowledge, no research examining the transition period from full-time school to full-time youth academy scholar. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that football academies do not necessarily operate in the same manner across the globe. However, it is not within the realm of this study to make comparisons or generalisations to other academies *per se*, and thus to seek credibility, this study will draw upon the work of academics who have studied football in the UK only.

The purpose of a UK-based football academy is to educate and prepare young players for a career within the first team or to be sold to generate income, and unlike other industries, recruitment into an academy can take place from a very young age (Adams and Carr, 2017; Manley et al., 2016). This enrolment is based on and requires internalisation of a set of traditional norms. Embodying the expected behaviours of obedience, adopting a strategy of silence, demonstrating toughness in line with historical notions of masculinity, and adhering to strict managerial authoritarianism have been just some of the dominant subcultures present in the existing literature (McGillivray et al., 2005; Parker, 2001; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b). Football is a dominant masculine environment where individuals learn what it is to be male due to the acceptance of the environment by those within and outside of it (Parker, 2000, 2006; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b). Thus, this paper examines the experiences of players as they transition from school into this environment full-time, which in turn, could contribute more holistically to the current literature within football. Finally, this could aid in understanding how young people's identity evolves during the impressionable youth life stage which could be a useful tool for offering guidance and support during these times (Elias, 1978). To explore these youth academy players' experiences, the theoretical framework of figurational sociology will be used. This framework arguably provides the opportunity to analyse how an individual behaves in

relation to others and how these interactions are processes by which individuals develop their habitus and identity (Roberts, 2009). With this study poised to analyse the processual transitions the players embark on, it is believed that this theoretical framework will be useful in exploring these experiences in detail while neither reducing the individual nor the environment to static entities (Elias, 1978).

Transitions

Morris et al. (2017: 524) assert that transition can be defined as a period or occurrence that an individual experiences which differs from everyday norms and daily changes. They add that transitions can be 'predictable' and 'non-predictable'. Despite Nesti et al. (2012) advocating for the term 'critical moments' as opposed to the term transition due to their interpretation that the word transition can indicate a smooth, uneventful phase, this study will adopt the word transition for several reasons. Firstly, the existing literature in both sport and other disciplines interested in these events utilises the word transition to mean the processes and experiences of development and change that an individual navigates which construct and reconstruct their identity (Batchelor et al., 2020; Hickey and Roderick, 2017). Secondly, the work of Nesti et al. (2012) is from a psychological viewpoint and while Elias (1978) would acknowledge this as meaningful for understanding an individual's interpretations of the events as part of the processual nature of identity and habitus development, he would not do so without considering the historical and sociological position of the individual. In other words, Elias would, according to Goodwin and O'Connor (2015), consider the ending of the phase prior to the transition as the first important part of the transition process. Similarly, Mitchell et al. (2014: 1297) suggest the need 'to explore changes in athletic identity over time' while being mindful that focusing on an individual in isolation away from surroundings and social interactions is neither fruitful nor useful for understanding an individual's identity and actions. Thus, although this study is grounded in sociological theory, it would be prudent to, at the very least, acknowledge transition work that has often resided more substantially in the psychological literature. Thirdly, Elias himself advocated the use of the word transition in his lost research that was reanalysed by Goodwin and O'Connor (2015). However, it is imperative to mention here, that Elias argued strongly that when understanding figurational change (in this case, the transition from school to youth team), it is crucial to understand that new social positions arise from old ones and that development and change are inevitable. In other words, while the concept of transition is useful when viewed as a somewhat turbulent phase where both positive and negative events can influence behaviours and identity development, there can be no definitive point for a transition to begin nor finish as the experience is different for each individual that negotiates it (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2015). This is particularly prevalent within the youth life stage.

The life stage of 'youth' has been somewhat extended in recent years from the biological understanding of the term that suggests youth encompasses ages 16–24 (Lahelma and Gordon, 2003). With young people remaining at home and in education longer, the 'boundaries between youth and adulthood have become blurred' and there is no definitive entry or exit age for this life stage (Lahelma and Gordon, 2003: 379). It is worth noting however, that this shift has largely remained unchanged for those who follow a

more traditional route and leave education at 16 years of age for an apprenticeship, work or to enter a professional sport. Richardson et al. (2013) state that football players experience a difficult transition as their initial local club environment is one of warmth and encouragement, whereas first team life in a professional football club is driven by the constant need to succeed and win. Adams and Carr (2017) argue that the young players are immediately isolated upon arrival at a club and lack real friendships due to the competitive academy environment. This period of transition is arguably made more difficult on the journey to adulthood and exploring one's individuality by the historical ideology that successful transitioning from school into paid manual work constitutes a masculine identity (Parker, 2006).

Mitchell et al.'s (2014) psychological study on athletic identity, asked 168 elite youth footballers in England to complete the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale. Several variables that were tested had no statistical significance on athletic identity; however, social identity among first years who were identified to have more association as a footballer than second years, did have statistical significance. The explanation given was that of a 'more recent positive transition from a schoolboy (i.e., part-time) to a full-time football player' (Mitchell et al., 2014: 1297). However, other than a reference citing the League Football Education, there is no offer of further explanation as to where the knowledge that it is a positive transition from school to academy originated. This definitive explanation arguably requires further exploration and clarity, given the lack of available research on youth academy transitions. Additionally, and to further justify our use of the term transition, Mitchell et al. (2014: 1297) later refer to Roderick's (2006a) work which states that a career from initiation to professional player is full of 'crisis and resolutions', suggesting there is an incomplete picture on the transitional experiences of young players.

Figurational sociology

Figurational sociology comprises several concepts such as figurations, habitus, established outsider relations and shock experience theory and these were used within this study to explore the network of relationships between individuals and their environment. Elias (1978) argued that an individual's identity is never complete and that a person is a process due to the web of relations formed during encounters with others. According to Elias (1978: 261), a figuration 'is a structure of mutually orientated and dependent people' and within figurations are interdependencies. These are webs or two-way links between people that are based on relations of power balances. Inherent in all relationships, power can be understood as constantly in flux and neither something to be owned nor possessed by any individual or group. The fluctuating power balances within figurations can be used as an analytical tool for exploring the behaviours and norms adopted by individuals that can influence identity and habitus evolvement. Furthermore, power balances can result in an increase in the length of interdependent chains as more actions are interwoven through the formation of additional interdependencies which are less planned, known or even intended (Van Krieken, 1998). Moreover, Elias stressed that a linear link between individuals, their actions and resulting outcomes does not exist and that the unplanned consequences of being within a figuration

where fluctuating power balances alter the flow of the processes, are in part, what contribute to an individual's identity (Elias, 1978).

Elias (1978) stated that humans are bound to one another through fluid interdependencies and this fluctuating dependence can be partially understood through the concept of 'habitus' (Dunning, 2002). For Elias, habitus translates as second nature and is a set of acquired dispositions where actions and behaviours are a result of internal familiarities or second nature beliefs (Dunning, 2002). These internalised beliefs that come from 'within' often operate subconsciously due to social interactions and therefore a habitus is socially constructed and is developed slowly over time by acting upon existing dispositions (Dunning, 2002; Roberts, 2009). In considering the fluctuating nature of power within figurations, Elias determined that an individual's habitus and identity can be both enabled and constrained into how they view their social world, how they treat their bodies and how they respond to others. This provides a useful tool for understanding players' transitions.

By focusing on the relationships within a football figuration, this study also drew upon two other theoretical frameworks from Elias. The first framework was devised to explore and explain power imbalances in a community environment. Elias and Scotson's (1965) work *The Established and the Outsiders* involved observing three different populations of people: the first was a middle-class group; the second was the oldest or resident working-class group; and the third was a newly arrived working-class group from London. The first two groups were regarded as the established groups, having settled there for a substantial time, and living in the most highly regarded streets of the area. However, although group 3 did not live in a particularly different way demographically to the other two groups, their lifestyles and choices differed. Opting to keep to themselves, socialising among only themselves and in loud, overbearing ways in public houses, over time, those in group 3 became ostracised and excluded from positions of influence within local organisations (Elias and Scotson, 1965). As part of this segregation, group 3 became a topic of gossip for the other two groups. Labelled as 'rough', 'noisy', 'dirty', the Outsider group were perceived as a 'they-group' where power relations were weighted against them by the Established groups. This continuous gossiping labelled the Outsider group as 'the minority of the worst' (Mennell, 1998). Elias argued that the power balance in favour of the Established group resulted in the internalisation and acceptance of these terms by the Outsiders as they were afforded little opportunity to retaliate, thus labelling themselves as the 'we-group'. In comparison, the Established group perceived themselves as superior to the Outsiders, liaising with one another successfully and thereby creating greater power chances within their existing networks (Mennell, 1998).

The second framework is a largely unknown project of Elias' entitled the 'Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles' where Elias wished to test his shock-experience theory (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2015). Elias began by identifying nine possible causes of shock and these were problems that the young people would potentially face when starting work. They included: understanding and handling money for the first time; understanding and acknowledging sexual desires; the need for a group of close friends; understanding how to cope in unfamiliar work situations; understanding how to manage relations with other adults in terms of competing or co-operating; making informed decisions; the requirement to control and monitor emotional feelings and

impulses; the management and learning of anticipation in certain scenarios; and understanding the 'quest for meaningfulness' (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2015: 34). Upon enrolment in the working world, Elias argued that the balance of power shifts; young people experience anxiety as they are expected to behave as though their colleagues are equals and this unfamiliar territory threatens their identity. Elias stated that historically, individuals experienced a 'rite of passage' or transitional role that eased the anxiety of transitioning into adulthood and thus, children would learn to differentiate between 'dreams and reality' (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2015). As a young person, the dream of being free and uncontrolled by others is very much appealing when preparing to leave school. However, the reality of the working world is distinctly different from what they imagined due to facing the nine problems of adjustment. Elias believed that often, young people who dream of a particular career fail and face a career that will meet the requirements of everyday living. This kind of acceptance of the reality of the adult world is regarded by Elias as a painful process that young people experience; thus, it is a shock-experience (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2015).

Research methods

Twelve semi-structured interviews took place at one English Championship youth academy during the 2018–2019 season. This youth academy was approached due to existing contacts that the second author has with the club. To begin with a total of four clubs (two Championship, one League One, and one League Two) were contacted, with this club being the only one of the four that was able to allow the research to be conducted. Purposive and convenience sampling was used to gather the participants required (Sparkes and Smith, 2018). Although the use of the entire under 18's youth academy squad ($n = 16$) was desirable and all the squad were invited to participate, four players declined and thus, 12 players aged 17–19 were interviewed. All interviewees were male, a full-time youth player and on a two-year contract with the club (see Table 1). The use of a gatekeeper was needed given the ages of the players and the notorious difficulty in gaining access to football clubs (Parker, 2001; Roderick, 2006a). This was overcome through the second author's previous career as a professional footballer and an introductory meeting that took place with both authors and the club prior to the commencement of the research.

The interviews took place one-to-one at the club. To ease any anxieties, participants were assured of anonymity and reassured that any data gained from the interviews would not identify them. With football a notoriously closed social world, the first author was aware that not having any personal experience playing football and being considered an 'outsider' may lead to limited discussions on certain topics. However, Law (2019) highlights that being considered an 'insider' can be problematic due to participants' assumptions that the researcher knows what they are divulging, which can result in incomplete explanations regarding their experiences. Furthermore, Law (2019) argues that players are trained for media interviews and speak in a guarded manner, which could also limit the richness of potential data. To combat this and to build rapport with the players, both authors attended the introductory meeting with the team and the interviews were conducted in a relaxed manner where the players were made to feel comfortable.

Table 1. Contextual background of each participant's playing career.

Player	Time at Championship club as a scholar at interview date	Time spent in youth academies' age groups at Championship club	Time spent at other youth academies	Local to Championship club?	Moved to attend academy at Championship club?	Previous levels of playing
1	9 months	Age 11 to present	Not applicable (N/A)	Yes	No	Sunday League; ages 5–11
2	9 months	Age 8 to present	N/A	Yes	No	School team; ages 5–8
3	2 years	None	None	No	Yes	Local home club/ Sunday League; ages 3–17
4	9 months	None	Two clubs (League 2) ages 12–15	No	Yes	Local home club ages 7–12;
5	9 months	None	None	Yes	No	Sunday League and school; ages 5–16
6	9 months	Age 9 to present	None	Yes	No	Local team; ages 6–9
7	9 months	Age 14 to present	Championship club ages 6–13 (two separate spells at the same club with only six months away)	No	Yes	Local team; ages 4–6; ages 13–14
8	9 months	Age 14 to present	Premier League club ages 10–14	No	Yes	Local team; ages 6–10
9	9 months	Age 9 to present	None	Yes	No	Local team; ages 5–8
10	9 months	None (trialled at 14)	None	No	Yes	Local Sunday League; ages 6–15
11	1 year, 9 months	Age 13 to present	Academy Development Centre; age 10–12	No	Yes	Local Sunday League; ages 6–10
12	9 months	Age 7 to present	None	Yes	No	Local team; ages 5–7

The analytical process of this study was underpinned by a deductive approach whereby figurational sociology concepts were drawn upon to examine the transition experiences of the youth players (Atkinson, 2012). Specifically, six-stage thematic analysis was used with the aid of NVivo 12 (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For stage 1, 'Immersion', each audio recording was listened to several times while notes were made simultaneously to identify any reoccurring words, themes or patterns based on key literature underpinning the study (Parker, 2000; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b). For stages 2 and 3, initial codes were allocated to groups of similar data with relevance to one another (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This was done using Elias' concepts of habitus, interdependencies, power, and figurations as the foundation upon which the codes were built. The organisation of the codes into overarching hierarchies for stage 4 allowed for clarification and to allocate meaning to each code. By using NVivo 12, the vast amount of data produced from the interviews was manageable and patterns were clearer (Bryman, 2016). Here, it was possible to identify hierarchies that would form the discussion as part of stage 5, identifying and naming themes. Specific codes such as 'early immersion', 'parental influence', and 'physicality', were identified and therefore, led by Elias' shock theory, this was renamed 'transitional experiences' and then sub-divided to detail the different types of transition such as 'smoother transition', 'a more difficult transition' and 'an initial transitional shock.' Finally, stage 6 involved the discussion of the themes between the authors and subsequent written analysis, which is detailed in the following section (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

A smoother transition

Each player was asked to describe their transition from full-time school to the academy with all 12 players starting football at the ages of 3 to 6 in a local club team. In line with findings from Roderick (2006a) and (Clarke et al., 2018), the immersion in a sporting football environment from an early age arguably contributed towards the establishment of a footballing habitus, an athletic identity, that rooted itself firmly in the young player's self. This was highlighted mostly clearly by player 10 who suggested that his involvement from a young age allowed him to develop a love for all aspects of the game:

> I started off at a very young age. I've really, really enjoyed it and the older you get the more you kinda knuckle down and you start realising. . . how much. . . it goes behind the scenes in football. . . how much you have to work. I love the work, I love the drive, it's kind of been in me since a young age.

Additionally, many players described significant parental influence in their entry into football, stating that their fathers were either managers of their local club, ex-players, or had strong footballing interests. This inspired initial participation and eventually, trials at other clubs and academies:

> P8: my dad like started off at coaching. . . a Saturday team, under 8s. . . ever since. . . being at school I just remember. . . being into football and then when I. . . turned 6, my dad just. . . put me in the side and I've just loved it ever since.

This early specialisation in football is arguably a deep-seated disposition or second nature according to Elias who believed a habitus was socially constructed. This could account for why half of the players did not find the transition period particularly difficult (Paulle and van Heenkhuizen, 2012); however, half of the players did find the transition more difficult and this will be discussed later. Player 7, who played for another academy before joining this club, offered childhood anecdotes about his journey into football with his father as a dominant figure in his commitment to sport, as well as a supportive secondary school that permitted absences to attend matches. Player 7 claims that full-time academy life is no different to being at school, which suggests adult control over younger individuals (Van Krieken, 1998):

> I was always in that environment from a young age. . .. I've gone from every day, half past 8, till 3 o'clock working like in school. . . it's sort of similar, but you're doing something you love. . . I didn't see it as a major thing.

Comparatively, Player 12, an academy player at the club since Under 7, said 'the transition was quite easy. . . everything was still here for me, I was still at home'. Having been at the club for 10 years and still living at home with his parents, it could be argued that very little changed for Player 12 when he left school as he said he 'hasn't sacrificed anything'. By his own admission, he expressed a drop in his attainment levels at school as he knew he had a scholarship and career he wanted:

> P12: When I started my GCSE's, I was already offered my scholarship, so I found it less pressure because I already had my next two years planned out.
>
> I: Did you achieve what you wanted to achieve from school?
>
> P12: I could have done better; I still passed all my exams, but I could have got higher grades. I probably took my foot off the pedal a bit because I knew what I was doing.
>
> I: So, what are your career aspirations?
>
> P12: Obviously play here [club]. Just go as high as I can really.

Player 12 possibly perceived his own transition to have been relatively smooth as he has remained at the same club for all his youth career. Player 12's path to becoming a professional footballer has, so far, seen only positive transitions, such as signing for the club he currently plays at from a young age; 'I got scouted by [club] when I was about 7. Been here from the very start. I live here, everything's here'. This early immersion in football could be said to be part of his association of having a smoother transition than other players who must live away from home. Arguably then, the continuation of the norms of Player 12's life is contributing towards his evolving habitus and solidifying his footballer identity further (Dunning, 2002).

With three-quarters of scholars never making a living from football, a concern for the mental health and wellbeing of players such as Player 12, who know nothing but academy football, should be acknowledged (BT Sport Films, 2018). Cushion and Jones

(2014) assert that the imparting of values and norms during educational years can result in the internalisation of behaviours and practices that lead to a significant identity, in this case, that of a footballer. In relation to Elias's thoughts on identity in conjunction with social networks, individuals should not be viewed as singular entities separate from social structures. Furthermore, Elias (1978) believed that people experience different situations and embody these experiences differently. Elias did not advocate dichotomising individuals in one place or another, rather he viewed people on more of a continuum than a scale. As such, Player 12 and his colleagues who felt the same, can be said to have experienced a smoother transition than some of the others. We would argue that a problem for the players may arise when a player is released from the club and movement away from this figuration and transition out of this environment challenges and threatens their well-formed football identity (Hickey and Roderick, 2017). It may be prudent to question whether Elias's ideas surrounding 'shock' have not yet been fully experienced by Player 12 but may occur in subsequent years? Ashton and Field (1976) argue that young people do not experience 'shock' until a significant period of 2–3 years post-school has passed. Further research, perhaps of a longitudinal nature to follow these players, may enlighten and answer this question.

Similarly, Player 4 who had enrolled at his local sixth form college before being offered his scholarship, expected a harder transition than he actually experienced. He explained:

> I thought it was gonna be much harder. . . I think it's cos I've been at several clubs so. . . I've kinda grew like in the professional game, so I'm used to it. . . And I just know, about the football feeling. And I got used to it. Literally, didn't really phase me, cos. . . I don't like education. Like when I was at my sixth form, I was like what am I here, I don't wanna do this, I wanna be a footballer. When I got the chance to, it didn't faze me at all.

It could be argued that, as per Ashton and Field (1976) who appear to disagree with Elias' ideas, the amount of time that has passed between leaving school and starting employment is too short to pass judgement on whether these players experienced 'shock', as the football figuration is a norm through which they are developing their habitus. In this habitus, aspects of domineering behaviours such as mental toughness and remaining silent have been normalised and could explain why some players found the transition smoother than others. Contrastingly, Player 3, who was aged 19, suggests that it is not possible for the transition to be simply labelled as smooth as he had time to reflect on his transition into the academy. In line with Elias' ideas of experiences on a continuum, Player 3 said that there were other factors that contribute towards how the transition unfolds:

> P3: It was a really, really, interesting and difficult time for me . . . I've moved up, away from my mates, don't know anyone up here. . . Like I was stuck in digs with 5 other lads. . . It's always difficult coming into a group of lads that are already so close knit and you've gotta try get in that group. . . You know there were nights at digs where I'd get really homesick.

Player 3 echoes the fifth problem identified by Elias relating to shock whereby these young players are experiencing elements of fantasy when they join the academy as they are achieving their dream, so nothing seems untoward or difficult (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2015). However, the reality is, as demonstrated by Player 3, that the adult world of

moving away from home is more difficult than first imagined which aligns with findings from Roderick (2006b) who states that relocating to nearer a club or to join a new club is often necessary to fulfil the dream. Families or relations must adapt to the prospect that relocation will be an inevitable part of involvement in professional football. Furthermore, Player 3 suggests that he became caught up in and by the nature of the world of football in how he portrayed himself to people back home, suggesting evidence of the evolvement of his habitus as the norms of football became the norms of his life:

> P3: When I got my first pay-check of £100 a week I thought 'I'm the man', like I thought I was some pro footballer. I was going home in my [name of club] kit, I was thinking I was all sorts. . . its only taken me until two years ago to realise what I was doing. You get the coaches that say 'don't let it get to your head' but I think when I first signed, you've gotta have that first little bit of wow, I'm a [footballer].

This discussion will now turn to the other players who found the transition difficult, before discussing those who specifically identified the experience as a shock.

A more difficult transition

The life of a young professional footballer is different from that of peers of the same age as the opportunity for most young people to move away independently of more knowledgeable adults is not something easily or readily achievable (Lahelma and Gordon, 2003). The possibilities given to academy players by clubs are evident: professional football training every day; matches; and a wage for fulfilling their dream while being in the small number of individuals who have secured a place. All players alluded to these possibilities, suggesting that the young players have the chance to gain independence and experience the transition into adulthood (Lahelma and Gordon, 2003). Despite the opportunity to become independent and follow their dreams of becoming a professional footballer, half of those interviewed described the transition into the academy as harder than expected, more demanding and more difficult. One particularly difficult aspect was the physicality of playing football every day. Even though they knew that this would happen, players 3 and 8 described feelings of constant tiredness:

> P3: [before] I was able to play pre-games all week and it wouldn't be a problem, whereas I'd play two games here and I'd be absolutely blowing.

> P8: the physical demands that have to be met. It's way more physical than Under 16s.

The demands of the first few weeks of pre-season were significantly higher, even for those who had been at the academy in younger age groups. Player 6 explained that it was not purely their physical ability that they began to question, but their mental endurance and despite being at the club prior to starting his scholarship, he felt like an outsider during pre-season:

> The first few weeks of the scholarship. . . was the most demanding. . . since I've been here. Physically, mentally, because. . . it was. . . tough on the legs, every day was running, football

> and it was. . . little recovery. I knew what I was expecting, and I knew it was gonna be a tough pre-season going into full-time football because you have to be fit. Like when I first come on trial. . . it was different. . . even being at such a young age you think everyone's so friendly. . . but then when you come in. . . you're treated a little bit like an outsider.

Player 6's comments align with the notion of 'Established–Outsider Relations' in that the newly arriving players although with same skill set, are cast into the 'Outsider' group. Those second years who are already part of the academy are the 'Established' group who are responsible for setting the standard of quality and talent that these new players must meet to be accepted (Elias and Scotson, 1965). The power balance in favour of the Established group could therefore account for these new Outsider players needing to adapt quickly or risk remaining as an Outsider, as it is the Established group who control, to a degree, who they 'allow in' to their 'we-group' (Mennell, 1998). This was confirmed when Player 7 said that he felt he must soldier on regardless as to his levels of exhaustion, to be accepted and show a good attitude:

> the workload was so high obviously fitness and mentally wise. . . even if you're in a little training session and they'll go 'right today's a low-key day', nothing's low-key cos you put your best in everything. . . that's what sets other players apart.

The competitive nature of the environment was distinctive upon arrival and arguably even those who had lengthy academy backgrounds experienced changes through the power balances which threatened their identity due to new chains of interdependence being formed with new teammates and coaches (Van Krieken, 1998). Pushing themselves to physical limits while admitting that this was difficult, compounds the presence of power imbalances, which aligns with findings from Law's (2019) study on contract negotiations as players strive to sign a professional contract. The addition of new first years in the figuration creates new interdependencies that unintentionally enable and constrain the actions of others. Player 7 alluded to a reluctance of the second years to accept the first years stating that 'there's a big split between 18s and 17s' (second and first years):

> This year, quite a lot of people have noticed quite a bit of friction between like the two age groups. . . and when you look at it in detail, he doesn't really get on with him because he's a second year, the second year doesn't get on with him cos he's a first year.

Player 11 also alluded to this divide, stating that it is the norm and 'the same every year':

> You have the second years, sort of asserting their dominance in a way, cos we're the new kids and they suffered with it last year. They sort of joke around and everything, take the piss and then they all got a bit tetchy when obviously the decisions were being made on them. . . they sort of view the first years, bit sort of inferior.

Here, the second years are demonstrating a greater balance of power due to their feeling of pressure to maintain and keep their position, while assessing what sort of threat these new players are and trying to maintain the perception that they are more powerful as they have survived the jokes of being a first year.

Another aspect that contributed towards a more difficult transition was leaving home, friends and family and moving into accommodation. Several players suggested that they were aware that their friends were doing very different things back home. Transitioning from one school to another and experiencing this with a circle of friends was the norm for some players and therefore to now be experiencing a transition alone and feeling increased responsibility did not go unnoticed:

> P2: It was hard adjusting for the first couple months. . . obviously you're away from all your friends, who you've been with your whole life, you've moved. . .to completely different career. . . they're still all back there, they're all doing their things.

Player 8 alluded to one of the other players 'changing' as a person when he moved to the club full-time in comparison to how he was at Under 16 level:

> I think it's just how you get on, just all individual really. . . always been good at making friends, but for some others. . . it is hard. . . some people ain't like that are they? There's one person in our group who's kinda changed from under 16, like we've seen him change. . . he's from [place], coming over here, big change and changes a person really.

Perhaps paradoxically, the majority of those who stated that they had an easy or relatively smooth transition said it was due to their previous footballing experience, yet these individuals suggest that the transition is anything but linear and smooth. This was irrespective of their pre-academy experience, which contradicts the statement of a positive schoolboy to academy player transition given by Mitchell et al. (2014). This could be explained as the unintended outcomes of power imbalances between these new interdependencies that occur during the first few weeks as a new academy player (Elias, 1978). The strong competitive environment that they are now part of, although not a surprise, is compounded by the fluctuation of power that is experienced when other players' movements and actions are thrown into the mix with their own.

Player 11 expands this argument by stating that the lack of timetable and structure during pre-season is another aspect that influences how one transitions into the academy:

> in pre-season cos there was obviously no education. . . the weeks were just sort of played by ear. . . there was no sort of set regime. Some days you'd get a day off, others you'd sort of work the whole week. So, obviously being from school with the timetable, you'd know what to expect, day in day out. . . with that being your whole life near enough.

The difficulties experienced by these players during their transition outline the differences in an individual's identity that mean the transition is neither linear nor predictable. According to Elias' shock theory, this transition period from childhood to adulthood is both anxiety inducing and threatens an individual's social order which they have come to depend upon as a constant during their school years (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2015). As such, the new power balances that these young players are exposed to as they form new interdependencies are in constant flux and are processual (Elias, 1978). Therefore, to assume transitions are either purely linear, positive, or negative is inaccurate and does

not depict the true experiences of these youth players. For some, the whole experience was more of a shock, and it is to this that the discussion will now turn.

Initial transitional shock

Some players used the word 'shock' when discussing their transition, particularly when managing training and academy work, completing education in less time than was allocated during school and adjusting to a rigid daily schedule. Player 1 explained:

> it really kind of hit me when I was doing this full time when the rest of mates went back to school and I was coming here. They'd be at school and I was playing football and it was. . . not a shock but it was, just I had to get used to it.

Although he states that his transition was not a shock, player 1 later alluded to a smoother transition once the initial impact of full-time training had passed. What he describes is arguably a paradox as he alludes to his transition as laden with obstacles. This player provides evidence of experiencing some of Elias' problems relating to shock theory. For example, adjusting to academy life meant that he encountered problems such as managing new personal connections with others in a work scenario and managing the need for a close group of friends (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2015). Perhaps then, he did not wish to be viewed as weak in relation to his new interdependencies created with other scholars as per findings from Fry and Bloyce (2017) and therefore describes his transition as one with certain aspects that he needed to normalise over time.

Player 10 openly used the word shock to describe his transition period. He described how the level of football that he played for his local club was completely different to the academy both mentally and physically:

> The competitive nature of being in this environment. . . I was really taken aback by it. I was really, really shocked. . . at home like I was probably one of the best players coming into every single game playing for my local club. When I came here it was just a different level and like I've been so used to being the main player, getting praise every single game, and then to come here and to have players that are miles, miles better than me, technically, physically. . . I was really, really shocked. . . it was a massive change. And I had to adapt very quickly. The intensity of here, than playing in your local club. . . is much higher. . . Physically, it's so demanding. And I had to get to grips with that. . . and I think I struggled very early on with that. . . the difference between them two? It's fierce.

When asked how he found the transition he replied, 'for me, that was the toughest part'. He found a relentless need to sleep to battle through the physical exhaustion in the first months and even began questioning his own ability:

> . . .the big thing as well as the transition from club football was, I thought, the amount of time I would have, but we have quite long days. We get in, we get picked up about 8, might not get home till about 5. . . so if I'm going to sleep for an hour, 6 o'clock, get my dinner, it's about half six, quarter to 7, watch a bit of tv, chill out, and then you're going to bed about 10, half 10 because you're wrecked. I had to adapt to that as well. Cos I was coming home, and I was like, 'I'm not sure I can last'.

As an Outsider 'they' group individual, the pressure felt by this player to adapt to training affected his performance on the pitch in those initial two months as he attempted to meet the standards set by the Established 'we' group existing scholars. He described his body as exhausted, as well as having to mentally cope with the new surroundings and demands of the academy:

> I did struggle the first month or so. . . trying to adapt to training and like coming in and thinking 'I can't do it, is this gonna be right for me?' 'my body can't take it'. . . and as well as that, performance on the pitch was affected. And I was like 'jees, I don't think I can do this'. And it just, reality hits you. . . it's like I've gotta work. . . a hundred times as hard.

Although there is no evidence to suggest that first-years train longer than second-years (Parker, 2001), the pressure to get their bodies to an acceptable level of physical and mental fitness while managing the demands of the environment, was compounded during witnessing the second-year scholars being informed of the club's decision to sign or release them. In alignment with findings from Adams and Carr (2017) and Fry and Bloyce (2017), the need to make friendships of convenience is evident here, particularly among those who journey through the ranks together. Player 10 appears to be one player who made genuine friendships as he said that the releasing of players affected him as some were players that he had formed strong bonds with or interdependencies of a positive nature:

> Like you're playing, for a place, a shirt, its ruthless. Absolutely ruthless. . . it does have an effect on you, but you try not to think about it. I think when something comes up so say if someone's being released that you get on well with, you've spoke to them, you've trained with them nearly every single day, like for the second years especially. . . they've been let know a couple of weeks back. . . and you're like 'pft, you're a decent player. . . you've had some good matches. . . you've scored goals'. . . for them to turn round and say 'right we're releasing you, we're not gonna offer you anything' is just like 'oh my days'. And I think that affected me. . . because you're so used to playing with players and. . . when they're not there you're like 'what am I gonna do?'. . . they're gone!

Player 10's discussion about his transition highlights sections of Elias' shock theory. Although both school and the academy are an institution, the role of the adults and strong players among the scholars arguably perpetuate power balances between individuals at the academy. Elias states that upon entering the working world, young people are expected to behave as equals with their colleagues; however, this is not the case in this football club (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2015). Here, it is unfamiliar territory, and is perhaps a unique example of a working environment where young individuals are not expected to act as equals with their colleagues. The constant pressure to be competitive and stand above the rest is part of the dream of being a footballer. They also dream of being released from the constraints of a formal education setting, yet the reality is that they remain institutionalised as their daily schedule is provided for them and is one that they are expected to conform to without question. More specifically, they must adhere to the rules and norms of the club, internalising expected behaviours irrespective of whether the players found the transition satisfactory, smooth, difficult, demanding, shocking or a combination of these (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2015). Particularly prudent during

transition appears to be the need for a group of close friends, as these players alluded to a sense of separation from long-term friends and difficulty during initial integration with new teammates, plus understanding how to cope in unfamiliar work situations when fellow players are suddenly released (Fry and Bloyce, 2017). The requirement to control and monitor their own feelings and impulses was evident when players felt that they were struggling. Finally, these players allude to experiencing different transitions, yet no matter which type of transition they described, it is evident that all had to make some adaptations to life as an academy footballer throughout their first year.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine youth academy male footballers' experiences of their transitions from full-time school to full-time professional academy. By conducting semi-structured interviews with 12 academy players at one English club, this study drew upon concepts of figurational sociology as tools for explaining the transitional experiences identified by the players.

Three types of transitional experience were identified by the participants including 'a smoother transition', 'a more difficult transition' and an 'initial transitional shock', with half expressing their experiences as generally smoother and the remaining half suggesting they experienced a more difficult or more shocking transition. In line with findings from Clarke et al. (2018) and Roderick (2006a) it is argued that early specialisation within football has a profound effect on how these players perceived their transitions. These players displayed strong athletic identities due to sustained engagement in football from a young age, with parental influence perpetuating their football habitus. The result of this was the internalisation of the norms of the environment which shows that the dominant sub-cultures so readily spoken about in the existing literature are still prominent features of football today (Parker, 2000; Roderick, 2006a). However, in line with findings from Roderick (2014), it is apparent in this study that many players demonstrate an awareness of the vulnerability of their profession. Ultimately then, if we are to progress in our care and support for the youngsters coming into and through football academies in the future, it is imperative to understand the sociological influences of the environment. For example, the formation of new chains of interdependence are how and why some players find the transition period smoother or more of a shock. The fluctuation of power within the figuration further perpetuates these young players' identities and habitus, cementing their desire to be a footballer as all participants spoke of their professional player aspirations.

When applying Elias' shock theory to analyse these varied transitions, it was found that several of Elias' causes of shock are present. Specifically, the need for affection and friendship is paramount in managing a transition to this football environment, while negotiating new relations with adults and learning when to compete and when to cooperate were evident during managing intense training sessions. The learning to make one's own decisions was also evident when players negotiated moving to the club and into accommodation for example (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2015). Perhaps most significantly, Elias's cause of shock that concerns how individuals manage a quest for meaningfulness was evident when players alluded to feeling like an outsider. This arguably proves that the

transition from school to the academy is non-linear and consists of new interdependencies that form as a result of adapting to the situation. Moreover, when considering that each player is an individual at their own life stage, transitioning from youth to adulthood is a blurred, unplanned time (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2015). This highlights that the youth stage of life is longer than historically understood and while understanding behaviours and identity formation is improving, adopting a generic approach towards individuals during their academy time is neither fruitful nor sensible. While Elias (1978) would suggest that each academy across the globe has its own historical context, these findings relate specifically to the English club studied. However, the general premise of each finding such as the consideration of these players as individuals while acknowledging how interdependencies enable and constrain their relationships with others in the academy, would arguably benefit this club (and possibly other UK clubs) by providing an environment where this knowledge can be used in a positive manner to yield success both on and off the pitch. Given the difficulty in conducting research on professional football because of the closed social world within which it sits and based on findings from this study, future research examining the transitions out of the academy at the ages of 19 or 20 would be beneficial to provide a more holistic picture of UK youth academy life.

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